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## Socio-political context and accounts of national identity in adolescence

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Psychological research into national identity has considered both the banal quality of nationalism alongside the active, strategic construction of national categories and boundaries. Less attention has been paid to the conflict between these processes for those whose claims to national identity may be problematic. In the present study, focus groups were conducted with 36 Roman Catholic adolescents living in border regions of Ireland, in which participants were asked to talk about their own and others' Irish national identity. Discursive analysis of the data revealed that those in the Republic of Ireland strategically displayed their national identity as obvious and 'banal', while those in Northern Ireland proactively claimed their Irishness. Moreover, those in Northern Ireland displayed an assumption that their fellow Irish in the Republic shared their imperative to assert national identity, while those in the Republic actively distanced themselves from this version of Irishness. These results suggest that for dominant ethnic groups, 'banality' may itself provide a marker of national identity while paradoxically the proactive display of national identity undermines minority groups claims to national identity.

### *The Boundary Commission*

You remember that village where the border ran  
 Down the middle of the street,  
 With the butcher and baker in different states?  
 Today he remarked how a shower of rain

Had stopped so cleanly across Golightly's lane  
 It might have been a wall of glass  
 That had toppled over. He stood there, for ages,  
 To wonder which side, if any, he should be on.

(Muldoon, 1980)

Over the past decade research has attempted to recover the 'lost nation of psychology' by examining the specificities of national identity (Reicher, Hopkins, & Condor, 1997). This has been enriched by two contrary aspects of national identity. The first, as

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articulated most clearly in the work of Billig (1995) is the 'banality' of nationalism. This ideological quality is inherent in the variety of symbols and habits (coins, flags, media, and national institutions) which imbue daily life and reproduce the national community in unnoticed ways. From this perspective, the existence of the national category and its boundaries is typically the assumed backdrop to everyday life (Billig, 1995). In effect, omnipresent nationalism is often unexpressed, but is always ready to be mobilized.

Billig's central argument is that the banal quality of national identity has a number of consequences. First, there is a tendency for us to ignore many of the more subtle markers of nationalism. Second, the banal nature of national identity results in a failure on the part of the national group to recognize inconsistencies and internal contradictions in the manipulation of national symbols. Third, nationalism, and in particular surplus or excessive national identity, is a phenomena most often attributed to those outside the national group. However, understanding of our own and others' nationalism can only be achieved with reference to the apparently banal.

The second influential understanding in this area is Reicher and Hopkins' (2001) view that all aspects of national identity are amenable to reconstruction for the purpose of particular political projects. Politicians can deploy the same historical resources, geographical features, psychological attributes, economic arguments, and political contexts in order to argue either for or against a particular political position (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). In situations of national conflict such as Northern Ireland, political actors argue over what constitutes a nation and how many nations exist within their territory (Stevenson, Condor, & Abell, 2007). In everyday talk, nationals can use a variety of historical, geographical, and political resources to actively construct their own and others national identities (Abell, Condor, & Stevenson, 2006; Wallwork & Dixon, 2004). In this sense then, the national context is often not a banal taken-for-granted backdrop but constitutes a site of argumentation and contestation. Paralleling Billig's (1987) earlier work on argumentation, and in line with a more proactive, strategic consideration of identity in self-categorization theory (SCT; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) the nation itself is up for debate, as are its contents and boundaries.

One reason for the coexistence of these competing understandings of national identity may be the heterogeneity of 'markers' of national identity and their uneven distribution across national populations (e.g., Kiely, Bechhofer, & McCrone, 2005). For most, nationality is assumed to be imbued unproblematically by birth, blood, or citizenship, for others nationality is less straightforward. Often the markers of their national identity such as history, geography, culture, and accent – the initial bases of understandings of national identity (Barrett, 2007) – can result in contradictory or problematized national identity. These problems are particularly evident at the boundaries of nations where the geographical and political elements of national identity are less certain. Border regions are atypical of their wider societies. Throughout Europe they manifest an ambivalence through subversion in informal economic activities such as smuggling, a sense of borders not as lines but as lands, as well as a self-reclassification process when the border is crossed (Donnan & Wilson, 1999). Whilst it often appears that state borders are institutionalized in national identity formation, in areas affected by political conflict national identity is often central to social divisions. Thus, even though there is not a straightforward relationship between national identity and the state into which one is born, it is a fundamental component of the conflict itself (Habashi, 2008; Muldoon, McLaughlin, & Trew, 2007). Paul Muldoon's *Boundary Commission* breathes poetic life into this issue and Irish people in the border regions of Ireland live this complexity.

In the border regions of Ireland, those resident in the Republic are unambiguously Irish, being entitled to vote representatives to the Irish parliament, being normally only eligible for Irish passports and attending schools in which the Irish language is afforded the official status of the first language of the nation (Fahey, Hayes, & Sinnott, 2005). The national flag is uncontroversial and infrequently waved. Signposts are bilingual (Irish and English), the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Catholic Church can be seen as pillars of the state and, by association, Irishness. On the other hand, for those resident on the Northern side of the border, elected officials hold seats in the UK Parliament, an Irish passport is an option, as is a UK one, the Irish language (which is sometimes offered in Catholic schools at second level) and the Irish tricolour are both contentious and politicized. The tricolour and its emblematic colours are often used to mark areas as Irish nationalist/republican (Bryan & Stevenson, 2009). Disputes around national identity are seen to have important social, psychological, and/or political consequences in Northern Ireland (Muldoon, 2004; Muldoon, Schmid, & Downes, 2009): national identity is 'hot'.

In adolescence, the active/passive distinction appears again in relation to understandings of nationality. A key theme in young people's writings in the border areas of Ireland was the natural inevitability of assuming the identities of parents (Muldoon *et al.*, 2007). A second striking theme in these accounts was the explicit denial that parents influenced or educated their children into national divisions or prejudices. Similarly, many parents cannot recall discussing contentious issues related to extant social divisions with their children (Gallagher, 2004). Contrary to the osmotic view of identity transmission, a proactive approach was viewed as necessary to promote positive intergroup attitudes. This is an interesting contention which suggests that we come to understand differences because of their centrality in everyday life. Indeed from these findings, it is arguable that challenging extant intergroup relations, in this case increasing tolerance of difference, is an active process.

The current study explores the relationships and divergences between the banal and the active (or 'hot') construction of national identity in the border regions of Ireland. Despite theoretical accounts that point to the importance of context and framing to the understanding of national identities, few studies have attempted to examine the potential impact of these factors on the management and expression of national identities. SCT (Turner *et al.*, 1987) argues that context is central to the application of a social categorization to the self or others. The application of the category to the self is believed to allow the strategic enhancement of the views of oneself. For instance, if a context allows the application of the Irish label which highlights a positive self-stereotype such as friendliness, categorization of oneself as Irish is likely. If on the other hand, the context shifts and the Irish label are associated with bloodshed, the application of the self-stereotype is less likely. Importantly, these self-stereotypes can also be used strategically (Reicher, Hopkins, & Condor, 1997) by the in-group (for example, the Irish in Northern Ireland) to distinguish itself from the out-group (the British in Northern Ireland) thus maximizing metacontrast.

In review, therefore, it is clear that national identities can only be fully understood by attending to social and political milieux within which people live as well as by attending to the framing of context in talk. To this end, the current study uses a responsive focus group method to explore young people's representations of national identity in talk. This approach allows for the elucidation of strategic rhetorical constructions of identity and how shifting frames of reference relate to respondents orientation to their national identity. Clearly, the fit between this qualitative approach and the SCT position is good. Our first aim, therefore, was to examine how two contrary aspects of identity – the active (hot)

and the passive (banal) – are articulated within groups that share their nationality across a geopolitical divide. Secondly, following the discursive approach previously developed to investigate national identity in talk (e.g., Abell *et al.*, 2006; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001) the ways in which participants oriented to, negotiated or strategically deployed aspects of the political and national contexts in which they lived was explored. Third, we considered the role that markers of identity may play in understandings of national identity and how these markers contribute to metacontrast between groups who share this disputed and historically violent area within Ireland.

## Method

### Participants

Six focus group interviews formed the basis of the current study. Thirty-six young people (12 males and 24 females) from our target group of 14- to 16-year-old Catholics, enrolled in 5 second-level schools in the border areas of Northern Ireland ( $N = 24$ ) and the Republic of Ireland ( $N = 12$ ), participated in the study. Schools were matched as closely as possible on a number of characteristics including size, religious affiliation (Catholic), location relative to nearest town, academic orientation, and socio-economic profile of the student population.

Focus groups were chosen as the method of investigation as, for adolescents, they are less intimidating and facilitate better discussion than one-to-one interviews. Secondly, group discussions often make explicit what is considered (in)appropriate interview interaction. Through interrupting, correcting, or disagreeing with one another, respondents shed more light upon what is considered to be normative (Condor, Abell, Figgou, Gibson, & Stevenson, 2006).

### Focus group context and process

The focus groups were conducted in 2006, 8 years after the landmark Peace Agreement, at a time when the Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended and Northern Ireland was under direct rule by the British government. On a pre-arranged day, focus group discussions were conducted in participants' schools. Prior to interviews, school, parental, and participant consent was obtained. Discussions were conducted in a closed area away from classrooms with groups ranging in size from 4 to 7 participants. A microphone was placed on a small table or chair in the middle of the discussion circle to ensure optimal recording of the focus group interviews. While this makes distinguishing individual speakers difficult, especially in larger groups, it was thought to be less invasive and distracting than individual microphones or video-camera recording. Participants were reassured regarding their anonymity. The facilitator for all groups was male and had a recognizably Northern Irish accent. Given our analytic position, in treating the discussion as an interactional object (Potter & Hepburn, 2005) this was considered an analytic concern rather than a confound and any explicit orientation to his nationality was noted and used to inform the discursive analysis of conversational interactions.

The topics covered during the focus group discussion related to young people's own perceptions of their nationality and how it was defined and expressed, the relationship between declared nationality and the border, views of the nationality of those residing the other side of the border and also how they came to understand their nationality.

In line with guidelines for smooth and functional focus group data collection, early questioning ensured that all participants were given the opportunity to offer their views (Greene & Hogan, 2005). Where questioning appeared to suggest a consensus of views, the moderator sought to explicitly draw contrary views both to span the diversity of opinion and to check the normative status of the opinions offered. Each discussion lasted approximately 1 hour.

### **Analytic method**

All discussions were taped and transcribed verbatim, including identification of pauses greater than a second (.), overlaps in talk [I, (laughter), emphasis and °quiet speech° and entered N-Vivo text tagging software for analysis. Ninety-two instances where reference was made to national identification, which included sufficient co-text for interpretation, were identified. Within each extract the different contributors to the conversation were identified, though, given frequent overlaps in talk, this was sometimes difficult. Where the identity of a speaker is uncertain, this is indicated by '?' beside their identifying letter. The extracts were analysed using principles derived from discursive and rhetorical psychology (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Potter, 1996). Specifically, the basis on which national identity was accomplished, as well as how membership was negotiated and used to achieve things in talk (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998), was identified within the text for each group. From this, an account of all the data was developed inductively, such that an explanation of what 'typically' or 'usually' occurs in the dataset was developed. Deviant case analysis (Silverman, 2001) was used to examine exceptional instances to amend and develop an exhaustive account of the data.

### **Analysis**

#### *Views of Irishness in Northern Ireland*

Respondents' talk of their nationality in Northern Ireland evidenced a number of distinctive characteristics in terms of content of articulation. All respondents unproblematically identified themselves as Irish and when prompted, were readily able to describe Irishness through a variety of national stereotypes, including national emblems, sports, cultural activities, and speaking the Irish language.

#### *Extract 1: NI-2*

- 1 Mod If you had explain to somebody from a completely different place
- 2 what it was to be Irish what kind of things would you say to them?
- 3 (2) What kinds of things make you Irish?
- 4 A Like [sports
- 5 B [Yeah sports
- 6 C Camogie and [Gaelic
- 7 B [The sports are better
- 8 A And the tradition
- 9 C Yeah traditions
- 10 B Irish dancing and all

After an initial hesitation, the respondents orient to the question as a request for stand-alone characteristics or stereotypes of Irishness. Particularly noteworthy is the spontaneous invocation of an unspecified comparison 'the sports are better' (line 7) which works to display a degree of investment on behalf of the speaker. More generally these stereotypes, rather than passive markers of Irishness, such as birthplace or ancestry, were typically presented as proactive behaviours or recreations in which respondents actively participated.

This proactive depiction of an Irish identity was particularly evident in respondent's talk of the influence of their parents, whereby parental instruction led to a general feeling of Irishness.

*Extract 2: NI-2*

- 1 Mod How did your parents teach you about being Irish. What kind of
- 2 things did they tell you that were?
- 3 A Old stories and that
- 4 B Legends
- 5 A Yeah legends
- 6 C Taking you places
- 7 Mod What about you guys?
- 8 D Sports. Just sports, yeah. I don't know why. Sports are introduced
- 9 to you when you are young (.) you just go by them.
- 10 E Not like you listen to it more but because you're young you're
- 11 doing it and you're doing what the Irish done but if people just like tell
- 12 you stuff sometimes you don't remember it.
- 13 Mod What sort of things did your parents say to you to make you feel
- 14 Irish?
- 15 B? °I can't remember°.
- 16 Mod What do you think they were trying to teach you to think?
- 17 D Probably to be like they were.
- 18 Mod To grow up in the same way that they'd grown up?
- 19 D To not go by the English like. That even though we are like ruled by
- 20 the English, it doesn't mean we're English. We're actually Irish
- 21 Mod Do you think they taught you to be Irish or not to be English
- 22 more? That's an interesting little point.
- 23 D To be Irish. Like there's nothing wrong with being English, to be Irish
- 24 because that's what they brought us up in.

Here, we see the presentation of cultural activities as active 'taking you places' (line 6), as focused on the content of national identity 'Old stories and that; Legends' (lines 3–4), and as self-consciously Irish 'you're doing what the Irish done' (line 11). Parental instruction was also presented as an active process 'that's what they brought us up in' (line 24). Though clearly providing a felicitous reply to the moderator's question, these responses are also recognizably claiming Irishness. In contrast to Condor's (2000) English adult respondents who downplayed or distanced themselves from explicit avowals of national identity, here claiming



Irishness is straightforward and proactive through the invocation of identity-related activities and experiences.

More broadly, the depiction of Irishness as a generalized state by the moderator 'being Irish' (line 1) is accepted unproblematically by respondents who respond in kind 'to be like they were' (line 17), 'We're actually Irish' (line 20), 'To be Irish' (line 22). In other words, Irishness is acknowledged here as an enduring internal state rather than as contingent upon the particular events or activities mentioned.

Extract 2 also typifies the tendency peculiar to the Northern Ireland groups to spontaneously invoke an oppositional model of identity. Here, we see an explicit statement of differentiation from the out-group, that the respondent's sense of Irishness has been defined against Englishness 'To not go by the English like' (line 19). In this way, respondents presented their own national identity as under threat or as in need of expression against an out-group. 'That even though we are ruled by the English, it doesn't mean we're English - we're actually Irish' (line 19-20).

On occasions, the proactive assertions of Irishness were made much more explicitly in reference to the broader political context, both in terms of opposition to the majority British population of Northern Ireland and to perceptions of Northern Ireland from outside the region.

### Extract 3: NI-1

- 1 Mod If you had to explain (.) to somebody °this is a good one for having  
 2 a discussion amongst yourselves° if you had to explain to  
 3 somebody from another country what it means to be Irish ahm  
 4 what would you say what would you tell them?  
 5 A About the whole split and the divide and everything (.) that we can't  
 6 believe y'know (.) that we are not all seen as Irish by people down  
 7 south or by people in Britain (heh heh) we're just sort of a wee state  
 8 that nobody really wants, like they don't want it and Britain don't  
 9 want it, so (.)  
 10 Mod Very good. What do the rest of you feel?  
 11 A But we want to feel Irish  
 12 B Yeah

Here, the first participant reflectively comments upon the nationalist community's ability to claim to be Irish and have this claim validated by external groups. Firstly, the divide is presented in itself as a characteristic of Irishness, thus placing Northern Ireland as central rather than peripheral to Irishness. Secondly, the assertion that Irish people in Northern Ireland 'can't believe' (lines 5-6) in their national identity is repaired and reformulated as 'that we are not all seen' (line 6) thereby undermining perceptions of those elsewhere in Ireland and Britain that nationalists are not Irish. This allows the respondent to preserve the personal experience or 'belief' of the nationalist community in the face of external challenge. In this way, the proactive claim of Irish people in Northern Ireland to be Irish 'But we *want* to feel Irish' (line 12) is presented as a counter to contrary opinions.

In sum, the pattern of identity talk among the Northern Ireland sample was somewhat akin to that noted among adult Scots by Kiely *et al.* (2005), as claims to Irishness based on a variety of markers. Moreover, the form of these claims adheres



to the discursive psychological understanding of 'doing identity' (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998): as establishing Irishness on the basis of claiming entitlement by citing self-consciously Irish activities and emphasizing proactive parental instruction. One function of such a proactive claim is made evident when respondents invoke the broader political context of Northern Ireland. Within this frame, assertions of 'felt' Irishness are pitted against wider challenges to perceptions of this group as authentically Irish.

*The view across the border: Northern Ireland perceptions of the Republic*

Northern Ireland groups readily distinguished their Irishness from that of their Republic of Ireland co-nationals. Specifically, respondents living in Northern Ireland asserted that those resident in the Republic were *more* Irish than they were. This could be articulated in terms of differences in economic and social development as well as in terms of the Northern Ireland political context as in the following extract:

*Extract 4: NI-4*

- 1 Mod You all see yourselves as Irish?
- 2 All Yeah
- 3 Mod Do you think they are all the same nationality as you? Do you
- 4 think they all see themselves on the other side of the border as the
- 5 same nationality as you? Maybe a silly question.
- 6 A They're probably more Irish
- 7 B More Irish
- 8 Mod More Irish, yeah. Are they Irish in the same way as you?
- 9 C It's a different state
- 10 D °No Protestants down there°
- 11 Mod What?
- 12 D No Protestants down there
- 13 C? It's more advanced there
- 14 A No sectarianism or anything like that

The moderator asks the participants about the boundaries of their national category 'all the same nationality as you' (line 3), but rather than answer in these terms, the *strength* of Irishness as the basis for distinguishing between the two groups is invoked. This works to maintain inclusion of both groups in the same category of Irish, while emphasizing the differences. In effect, these respondents do not suggest that they have a qualitatively different form of Irishness, but that those in the Republic of Ireland have a more accentuated form.

In addition, the wider political context is invoked to explain this difference. The political state 'It's a different state' (line 9) and the majority Protestant population 'No Protestants down there' (line 10) are also used to account for this difference such that the presence of Protestants and British rule are offered as explanations of why Irish people in Northern Ireland may feel less Irish. As noted above in Extract 3, there were assertions that those in the Republic of Ireland would view people in Northern Ireland as less Irish as well.

*Extract 5: NI-3*

- 1 Mod They're probably more Irish? What does that mean, how do you
- 2 mean more Irish?
- 3 A More culture
- 4 B Cos they're not part of Britain
- 5 Mod They're what?
- 6 A [They're not part
- 7 B [They're not part of Britain
- 8 C They're their own country
- 9 Mod And that makes them more Irish
- 10 A Yeah
- 11 C Cos they're ruled by the Irish
- 12 Mod When you say more cultural what kind of things do you mean?
- 13 B Like sport
- 14 D Speak the Irish language
- 15 A Music and Irish schools
- 16 Mod There's plenty of that up here although not maybe speaking in the
- 17 schools so much. But there's plenty of the sports, plenty of the
- 18 music, plenty of the culture up here
- 19 D You can't express yourself up here or else you get shot by the UVF
- 20 (laughter)
- 21 Mod So you don't think you can speak out loud?
- 22 D You can't really like. Well you can't do it as much as you could across
- 23 the border because no-one would say nothing to you. Cos that's where
- 24 you're from but if you do it like here
- 25 Mod So you think people up here are stopping you being Irish?
- 26 D [Yeah
- 27 A [Yeah
- 28 B? [Yeah

Here, we see the elements of Irish national identity previously displayed in these groups in relation to their own national identity: activities are asserted by respondents in Northern Ireland to occur more frequently south of the border (line 3).

When the moderator challenges this account by highlighting the prevalence of such activities in Northern Ireland, the respondents then invoke the oppositional understanding of Irishness, that it has to be expressed against an oppositional force (the Protestant paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force) 'You can't express yourself up here or else you get shot by the UVF' (line 19). In this way, they present the inference that because Irishness is opposed in Northern Ireland it cannot be expressed as readily and strongly. In effect, in order to maintain the category-related features of Irishness congruent with their own mode of identity display, Irish adolescents resident in the North depicted the higher levels of Irishness evident in the Republic as being as a result of the opportunity for greater level of identity-relevant activities.

*Views of Irishness in the Republic of Ireland*

When the focus groups in the Republic of Ireland were asked about Irishness, a similar list of stand-alone attributes was produced. However, the content of the stereotypes

and the manner in which these were articulated differed. In the following extract, we see the moderator using much the same technique as in Extract 1 to elicit information about Irishness:

*Extract 6: Rol-2*

- 1 Mod If you had to explain to somebody from a different country ahm
- 2 what it means to be Irish, what kind of things would you say?
- 3 A GAA
- 4 Mod GAA?
- 5 A Yeah
- 6 B Shamrocks
- 7 C °We don't have [ahm°
- 8 D [The counties, all the different counties and the provinces

In this focus group, the initial questions about Irishness are met with the typical assortment of stereotypes (lines 3–8). However, in contrast to the focus groups in Northern Ireland, respondents rarely emphasized the proactive nature of these activities. Irishness is acknowledged as a feature of everyday life, but respondents avoid talking about activities that are self-consciously Irish, preferring to offer alternatives such as geographical referents, icons, and cultural practices which are devoid of any partisan connotation. Similarly, when talking of the origins of their sense of national identity, respondents indicated that their own Irishness was evident through cultural practices and occasions of Irishness which had little to do with their own self-conscious participation:

*Extract 7: Rol-1*

- 1 Mod Ok ahm, how-how did you come to know you were Irish? (.)
- 2 A °Cos we live here°
- 3 (laughter)
- 4 Mod When did you, when did you think you first felt Irish?
- 5 A [If like
- 6 B [If you
- 7 C If someone asks if you're Irish you'd say 'yeah'
- 8 D Like we do all Irish culture things [and all
- 9 B [If you play an instrument you sort of feel (.) that you're Irish
- 10 A Whenever that Easter Rising thing was on you sort of felt (.) Irish
- 11 Mod Any (.) other things that make you feel Irish?
- 12 (inaudible)
- 13 D St Patrick's day
- 14 Mod Did your parents teach you you were Irish or where did it come
- 15 from?
- 16 A Yeah – your granny or your parents or whatever
- 17 D Yeah and on St Brigid's day making those wee crosses
- 18 B? Sitting outside school
- 19 (laughter)

Here, participants identified these practices as a matter of fact, as something external to themselves, rather than how they chose to express their Irishness. Although the moderator offers the same interpretation of Irishness as a transcontextual feeling ('that make you feel Irish') respondents here do not accept this formulation in the same way as their Northern Ireland counterparts do in Extract 2 above. This is particularly evident in a comment made by participant A in response to the original question: 'cos we live here' (line 2). Events such as St Patrick's Day or the commemoration of the Easter rising are presented as occasions on which respondents felt Irish, rather than opportunities to assert national identity. Likewise, music and dance were presented as external circumstances under which one experiences a felt national identity rather than an expression of Irishness (line 9).

Young people represented parental influence as relatively peripheral to their education into their nationality. This is in contrast to the Northern Ireland sample as noted above and works to present national identity as a passive rather than an active learning process. In this extract, this response is typified by the dismissive reply 'your granny or your parents or whatever' (line 16), which, in using a weak completion 'whatever' to a three part list, works to accomplish a denigration or dismissal of the importance of the issue (Jefferson, 1990). Consequently, another respondent appears to ignore the question and offer another occasion of Irishness, 'St Brigid's Day' (line 17) in reply.

The presentation of Irishness as something external, as passively absorbed and as characterizing the background rather than the substance of their lives parallels Billig's (1995) notion of 'banal nationalism'. While Billig's argument is that nationalism typically does constitute the banal backdrop to everyday life, in contrast here we see the strategic use of banality to distance the speakers from any potential interpretation as invested or interested in their nationality. This was particularly evident where respondents presented exceptional instances of overt displays of Irishness among people living in the Republic of Ireland as extreme or irrational. In the extract below, an Irish language teacher that owned and hung the national flag in his room is presented as 'crazy':

*Extract 8: Rol-I*

- 1 A And Mr McGuinness he's in a wee world of his own
- 2 Mod Who's that?
- 3 A He's the [Irish
- 4 B [The Irish teacher
- 5 C He's crazy
- 6 D He is crazy
- 7 A He always has a tricolour with him
- 8 Mod Yeah? (inaudible)
- 9 C He's crazy, he's a flag up in the room and everything
- 10 B I don't know what he's doing teaching here [because like
- 11 C? [But he's dead on really
- 12 E? Yeah
- 13 C But he's crazy

The irrationality of this teacher's behaviour is conveyed in a number of ways. In addition to the repeated expression 'crazy', his behaviour is characterized as excessive through the use of 'extreme case formulations' (Potter, 1996), including 'he always has a

tricolour with him' (line 7) and 'he's a flag up in the room and everything' (line 9). In addition, the man is characterized as idiosyncratic 'in a wee world of his own' (line 1). The excessive nature of this Irishness is being presented as counter-normative to the groups' previous representation of the taken-for-granted nature of Irishness. In turn this form of accounting for national identity bears some similarity to that of English adults (Condor, 2000).

*The view across the border: Republic of Ireland perceptions of Northern Ireland*

Respondents in the Republic of Ireland also displayed awareness of differences between the lived experiences of national life on each side of the border. They mentioned the political nature of the border and the different government jurisdictions implied. The conflict in Northern Ireland and the existence of a majority Protestant population who wish to remain British were also cited as differences. Growing up in Northern Ireland was reported to be different on a day-to-day basis to their own experience. However, this was accompanied by assertions that some in Northern Ireland saw themselves as Irish and responses to questions around this typically aroused some conflicting opinions.

*Extract 9: Rol-2*

- 1 Mod Do you think people on the other side of the border are the same
- 2 nationality as you?
- 3 A [Yeah
- 4 B [Yeah
- 5 Mod You do? (.) You think the people [there are
- 6 A [I think they're (.) people from Northern Ireland, we're Irish and they
- 7 are Northern Ireland
- 8 B I think they are because my sister's boyfriend is from there and he is
- 9 into all the Gaelic sports and everything, he's just the same
- 10 A But that's just some places, some places
- 11 C Yeah but it's part of Ireland, it's Irish, I don't see it as Britain
- 12 A But some people living there don't want to be seen as part of Ireland,
- 13 so like (.) they're not Irish (heh heh)
- 14 So it depends on what the people think? Those people who say
- 15 they are Irish in the north, do you think they are Irish in the same
- 16 way as you?
- 17 They live in Ireland
- 18 So you think they are (.) What about you guys?
- 19 If they want to be, they are

The extract contains a number of quite sophisticated negotiations of the issue of nationality in Northern Ireland. Some respondents readily agree that those in Northern Ireland are included in their national category, but when the moderator asks for clarification, the response is less straightforward. If we focus on the ways in which the participants counter and regulate one another's arguments we can see more clearly the competing concerns they negotiate (Condor *et al.*, 2006). The first participant denies shared nationality on the basis of distinct political/geographical units. Specifically, this participant asserts that people from the Republic possess the national identity of 'Irish',

while those in 'Northern Ireland' are defined by that territorial label (line 6–7). This enables the speaker to claim her own nationality without having to establish or deny similarity or difference with the people of Northern Ireland.

A different strategy is adopted by the next participant who orients to the issue of similarity by introducing an argument based on the shared cultural practices in Northern Ireland and the Republic. She invokes the behaviour of her sister's boyfriend to claim that people from Northern Ireland can be similar on the basis of cultural activities (line 8–9). However, in order to do this, the participant is invoking the form of Irishness characteristic of Northern Ireland groups. In other words, she emphasizes active identity claim on the basis of Irish activities rather than the passive negotiation of identity stake more typical of her own group.

This assertion does not go uncontested within the group as the next speaker counters through the use of a further geographical referent, by claiming that the previous participant's example may not be characteristic of Northern Ireland as a whole (line 10). This works to shift the emphasis from people to place and avoid attending to the contested nature of Irishness in Northern Ireland. The disagreement is made more explicit in the final exchange between participants which highlights the tension between the argument for geographical unity and the awareness of the complexity of the issue of nationality within Northern Ireland: 'It's part of Ireland, it's Irish, I don't see it as Britain; But some people living there don't want to be seen as part of Ireland, so they're not Irish' (lines 11–13).

Here then is the crux of the dilemma faced by respondents in the Republic of Ireland. On the one hand, they assert that some people in Northern Ireland see themselves as Irish and wish to be part of their state. On the other, they acknowledge that these people have a very different understanding of Irishness. As above (line 19), this was typically managed by participants through an emphasis on the 'choice' of people in Northern Ireland which inoculates against excluding or imposing national identity on people living there. This can, however, also be used to undermine the authenticity of claims to Irishness.

#### *Extract 10: Rol-1*

- 1 Mod (Ok ahm) Do you think the people on the other side of the border  
 2 are the same nationality as you?  
 3 A No  
 4 B No  
 5 C No  
 6 A No (.) like cos like England rules them [(so it is like England probably)  
 7 B? [They believe they are though cos like I was talking to them one day  
 8 and they believe like they're ahm Irish because they don't want to be  
 9 English

Republic of Ireland groups typically indicated that Irishness had very different connotations in Northern Ireland. Of particular interest in this extract is an oppositional definition of Irishness in Northern Ireland: 'They believe they're Irish because they don't want to be English' (line 7). While this account closely mirrors Northern Ireland groups' own accounts of their Irishness as asserted in the face of opposition, in this context it is being used to suggest that although Northern Irish people may choose their Irishness, or 'believe' they are Irish, this is not actually the case.

## Discussion

The claims to Irishness made by adolescents differed relative to geopolitical context. The sample from the Republic of Ireland presented their Irishness as self-evident. Adolescents in Northern Ireland, on the other hand, articulated their Irishness as a more proactive set of behaviours and feelings. In effect, each group presents a different understanding of Irishness and moreover the Northern Ireland group represents those in the Republic as super-Irish because of their 'Irish behaviours'. However, the Republic of Ireland group present these as banal and not warranting attention. This finding in itself highlights the importance of the impact of one dimension of context, participants perception of their geopolitical context, on the expression and management of national identity in adolescence. In Billig's (1995) terms, 'hot' or contested nationality was constructed through proactive claims whereas banal nationality was presented as uncomplicated and self-evident.

Whilst family mediated identity practices were reported as similar in both jurisdictions, for the group resident in the Republic, family transmission of identity was not articulated as active. Conversely, for the Northern group identity transmission was presented as a more active process. Therefore, it can be said that understandings of family identity practices also appear to differ in relation to geopolitical context. This has two important implications. Theoretically, it would appear intergenerational transmission of social identities, values, and beliefs are related to extant intergroup relations. Muldoon *et al.* (2007) demonstrated that parental teaching of intergroup tolerance is a present issue in the writings of many young people in the religiously divide communities of Ireland. Similarly, our finding that family mediated identity practices are more actively attended to in the contested Northern Irish group suggests that such practices are understood in relation to a perceived need to assert or challenge a social position.

Whilst this is noteworthy, it is perhaps more interesting and indeed consistent with our theoretical framework to consider the strategic function of these divergent identity claims. It is arguable that those resident in the Irish Republic are seeking to harness the banality of their Irishness. It may be that the claim to banality is just that- a claim- that excludes and distances those who proactively assert their Irishness. This position is resonant with Todd *et al.*'s (2006) argument that suggests that adults living in the border counties of the Irish Republic simultaneously assert inclusiveness and tolerance of Irishness whilst at the same time excluding those resident in Northern Ireland, both Catholic and Protestant, for being intolerant and exclusive in their national definitions.

Adolescents in the Republic of Ireland displayed an understanding of Irishness somewhat akin to that noted by Condor (2000) in relation to Anglo-British adults' representations of Englishness, especially in relation to matters which could be treated as of national interest. While Condor attributes difficulty in negotiating Englishness to concerns around the expression of national pride and associated xenophobia, it would appear that respondents in this context are orienting to a different set of issues. Despite the exclusivity of their understanding of Irishness, Republic of Ireland respondents were aware of the need to respect the Irishness of those resident in Northern Ireland. From interviews undertaken with adults, Todd *et al.* (2006) argue that this inclusion of the Northern population in the definition of the nation belies a rejection of this same group as Irish on the basis of their moral values which are viewed as inconsistent with definitions of Irishness in the Republic.

Consistent with this ambivalence, the young people in our studies have articulated views that Irishness is intrinsically associated with equality and social inclusion on the



one hand, but co-presented definitions of Irishness which are exclusive and difficult for minority groups. Thus our findings would appear to be consistent with the strategic and constructed nature of national identity as outlined by Reicher and Hopkins (2001): the positive presentation of the in-group maintained (and the claims made are used to bolster) the metacontrast between the Irish north and south, thereby excluding the northern Irish. This may be due to the accent of the interviewer, as evidenced by the occasional orientation of participants, but for present purposes it demonstrates that the negotiation of issues around national identity occurs relative to broader perceptions of the relationship between specific groups and the nation.

In terms of theory, Billig (1995) argues that national identity is typically banal, being a background rather than foreground feature of everyday life. Our findings suggest that our participants living in the Irish Republic strategically used this banality to affirm their identity. Furthermore, those from the Republic of Ireland recognized two qualitatively distinct forms of Irishness, north and south and their capture of banality implicitly strengthened their claim to Irishness at the expense of their northern conationals. Thus, it damages the northern Irish (Waddell & Cairns, 1991) claim to Irishness and assists their exclusion psychologically, socially, and perhaps most importantly politically from the national project. Contrary to Kiely *et al.*'s (2005) findings, the endorsement or over-use of identity markers is counterproductive, undermining rather than consolidating identity claims.

The function of the northern Irish claim to Irishness is equally of interest. It is, of course, highly embedded in the contested nature of national identity in this jurisdiction. First, the claim to Irishness, and its more competitive orientation, is consistent with previous findings which suggest that identity in Northern Ireland is heavily dependent upon mutual differentiation between categories (Muldoon *et al.*, 2007). In this context, the claim to Irishness as active and evidenced through national practices such as sport, dance, or language, effectively excludes and marginalizes many in the British Protestant community in Northern Ireland who have no affinity to these practices. By excluding this group from Irishness, their political claim to Ireland, and more specifically Northern Ireland, is of course also undermined.

However, by excluding this group from Irishness, the majority of the Northern Irish population - the Protestant British community - is excluded from the Irish national community. This, of course, reduces the likelihood of unification Ireland north and south. In effect, the current geopolitical context appears to have resulted in two seemingly contradictory positions (at least in terms of traditional green and orange politics) being adopted by this northern Irish group of Catholic respondents. However, the current political context has allowed these positions to emerge. The Irish in Northern Ireland have long shown ambivalence towards unification (Ruane & Todd, 1996) which can be seen to be reflected in a claim that debars progress to unification with the Republic. Second, the importance of asserting Irish identity to an audience of British Protestants within Northern Ireland and to the Irish in the Republic of Ireland as the new political dispensation beds in is paramount.

The study has a number of important theoretical implications. First, claims to nationality are constructed differently contingent on perceptions of the geopolitical context. These differences support Billig's (1995) characterization of the distinction between hot and banal nationalism. Second, the geopolitical context is actively harnessed by adolescents to support their strategic claims to national group membership as is maintained by SCT (Turner *et al.*, 1987). Indeed, banality itself is seen as powerful tool to employ strategically. Third, the geopolitical context is itself used strategically in talk to inform argumentation around national identity.

In terms of practicalities, the manner in which national identity is claimed and constructed diverges considerably even amongst those purporting to claim the same national identity. For instance, for those in the Republic of Ireland it was possible to be too Irish and hence, paradoxically, overt demonstrations of nationality compromised claims to national identity. On the other hand, those in Northern Ireland felt overt demonstration of Irishness improved one's pedigree. Clearly, this creates potential occasion for cross-border misunderstandings in this context. In other contexts, for example, attempts by marginal members of national populations (such as immigrants, second generation national group members) to integrate by asserting nationality are likely to be viewed as problematic by those claiming banal national group membership.

Whilst, the location of these interviews in the border counties of Ireland as well as the use of a moderator from Northern Ireland demonstrably made salient issues of identity conflict, our findings suggest that adolescents who are members of an uncontested dominant national group appear to learn much from the ubiquity of the national political context. They can strategically use this banality to consolidate their national identity in an unproblematic manner even in 'borderlands'. For those negotiating contested identities, however, constructions are undertaken in a different way and young people have to learn how to express their national identity. Geopolitical contexts are central to this learning process. Clearly, national identity that is coterminous with society is understood as more passive than that which must develop in the face of marked in- and out-group opposition. Despite this, by early adolescence this task has been successfully negotiated and the complexities of the argumentation around national identity are evident. Be it hot or not, the national project has been fully embraced.

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